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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Landscapes and Sublime Memories: Revisiting Liang Xiaosheng's "A Land of Wonder and Mystery"

Abstract This essay suggests memory studies, ecocriticism, and trauma studies as new avenues for the study of rusticated youth narratives. Towards reaching this goal, I first introduce a meditation on memory by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), especially his sketch of memory and imagination with classical Greek philosophy. His ideas on affective and practical memories are then telescoped into individual and communal memories. *Onze Fleurs* (*Wo shiyi*) (2011), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (1966–), and *The River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu*) (1984), directed by Wu Tianming (1939–2014) provide illustrative examples of each. Building upon these notions of personal memory I turn to the popular memory of rustication, especially that of the natural environment in Liang Xiaosheng's "A Land of Wonder and Mystery." More specifically I examine the evocation of the ghost marsh, narratives of departure, the family left in the city, and the menace of nature in Liang's short story to force not only a reconsideration of rustication, but also of nature in contemporary China. Moreover, in addition to noting the questioning of the sanitization of rusticated memories as a means of conforming to dominant state ideological discourses, I introduce a comparison of the story of doomed rusticated youth to the doomed youth in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild*, in order to force a comparison of youth and the environment often overlooked in rusticated youth studies. Finally, this essay concludes by suggesting that by more carefully considering the interplay between memory and place more nuanced and perhaps more ecologically and critically engaged assessments of rusticated youth fiction become possible.

Keywords Liang Xiaosheng, rusticated youth, trauma, memory, ecocriticism

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Introduction：Remembering Rustication in Contemporary China

As "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" (*Zheshi yipian shenqide tudi*) by Liang Xiaosheng (1949–) nears its conclusion Li Xiaoyan, Wang Zhigang, and Liang Shanshan die in a remote, lonely swath of the Great Northern Wasteland (*Beidahuang*) that they call the ghost marsh (*guizhao*). Their deaths are lionized by the narrator and vilified by critics of rustication, but beyond these melodramatic accounts, the Great Northern Wasteland, the ghost marsh, and countless other landscapes in innumerable remembrances of joining a troop or being sent up to the mountains and out to the countryside, simultaneously offer a link between the lingering cultural and ecological effects of rustication and suggest a new way to read texts by authors such as Liang.[1] Even though students were no longer mobilized after 1980 and *Zhiqing* Affairs offices throughout the country were closed in 1981, reminiscences on rustication continue to haunt and seduce writers, filmmakers, and their critics today.[2] Young men and women temporarily sent out of the cities in the 1960s and 1970s have long since returned, but each returnee, as well as their sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, parents, and children (rural and urban alike), live among the echoes of their experiences just as those with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder live with flashbacks. Thus it is unsurprising that attempts to understand or represent rustication continue to generate discursive space in elite and popular mileux wherein real and fictional communities and memories emerge, circulate, and disappear as bears, Oroqen (*Olun chunzu*) hunters, and young Chinese men and women vanish in Liang Xiaosheng's ghost marsh.

Due to the scope of the rustication program—seventeen million persons—few lives in major urban centers are uninfluenced by the experiences of these young men and women with each other and with nature. Therefore memories of the landscape of

[1] Rustication is here used to refer generally to government directed movement of urban young persons and others to rural and primitive areas. These movements can be translated literally as "being sent down" or "being sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside," which stem from the Chinese "*shangshan xiaxiang.*" *Chadui*, or "joining a troop," is often used in Chinese texts, but found less often in English. Thomas Bernstein translates *shangshan xiaxiang* as "up to the mountains and down to the villages."

[2] For more on the history of rustication undertakings including the above dates see Cao Zuoya, *Out of the Crucible,* 5.

rustication also provide a promising subject for cultural and critical studies of the era and the participants in addition to more restricted disciplines of literary, film, and media studies. Millions of Chinese men and women in China and abroad, many of whom are today leaders in politics, science, and the humanities share memories of being sent up to the mountains and down to the countryside in the 1960s and 1970s; unfortunately they are often referred to as the "lost generation." Pan Yihong, who worked as a farm laborer near the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia and later lived in a small village on the Huai Plain writes, "Life has changed so much, but memories of those rural days have never left me."[3] Perhaps her memories of the experience seem enduring and immutable, but fictional "memories" created by writers and filmmakers, among others, seem less stable and appear to serve both those who claim authentic memories, such as Pan, and those who neither traveled up to the mountains nor out to the countryside.[4] It also seems feasible that such fictional memories in film, fiction, and television serve as mnemonic prostheses that support and subtend the identities of innumerable Chinese of the 80s (*balinghou*) generation and those since.

This discursive essay suggests several approaches to unpacking stories about rustication, paying special attention to memories and memory, landscape, nostalgia, and narratives of departure. In reaching this goal, I will first introduce a meditation on memory by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), especially his sketch of memory and imagination in classical Greek philosophy. His thoughts on memory and remembering will serve as a conceptual point of departure by introducing affective and practical memory, which I will then divide into individual and communal memories. *Onze Fleurs* (*Wo shiyi*, 2011), directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (1966–), and *The River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu*, 1984), directed by Wu Tianming (1939–2014) provide illustrative examples of each.

Memory and Memories: Affective, Communal, Individual, and Practical

An empty bottle and a small tin can on a windowsill, a hillside outside—a still

[3] Pan Yihong, *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace*, 2.
[4] For the best survey of rusticated youth fiction (*zhiqing xiaoshuo*) available in English see Cao Zuoya, *Out of the Crucible*,.

life—fill the screen as Wang Xiaoshuai's film *Onze Fleurs* begins. Text superimposed on the image situates the moment in an anonymous munitions plant of the Third Front military-industrial complex (*Sanxian jianshe*) in southwestern China in 1975. Beneath the Chinese text in the subtitles a translation offers "1975, Southwest China. One year before the end of the Cultural Revolutior [sic]."[5] The second establishing shot reveals eleven-year-old Wang Han watching his father arrange a vase of flowers, composing a still life, for the boy to paint. This is the first of a number of such *mise-en-scene* that lead to moments of *mise-en-abyme* but, instead of plays within plays, such sequences comprise moments within moments, drawing attention to the constructed and nested nature of memories, emphasizing that we remember the circumstances or contexts surrounding our recollections.

As the two gaze at the flowers, a disembodied adult Wang Han offers in a voiceover, "You spend your life observing others. You imagine being born elsewhere. You dream of another life. But one day you realize that it's impossible. You're just you, born into this family, at this time. Your dreams won't change your life's path. Your life. You have to accept it and respect it." Roughly two hours later the film closes as Wang Han and his friends run to see an execution. Out of breath, Wang Han stops as his friends run on, and there is another voiceover: "I can't remember if I heard the shots." The boy turns to return home and the man continues, "Shortly after, China experienced major upheavals. All these memories are fixed in my mind. That year I was eleven." Thereafter superimposed text details the deaths of Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong, and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in both Chinese and English as a dirt path leading in and out of a fog fills the screen.[6] The fog itself suggests the fog of memories, or the cloudy abyss whence memories often unexpectedly arise like the will o' the wisp that floats across the ghost marsh at night in "A Land of Wonder and Mystery."

Wu Tianming's film, *The River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu*), opens

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[5] Unless otherwise noted all translations are taken directly from the subtitles, they are not mine. As noted below, the Cultural Revolution is not mentioned in the Chinese text. The Third Front is probably left out of the English text, because it is largely unknown outside of China.

[6] It bears mentioning that the Cultural Revolution does not appear in the superimposed Chinese text until the conclusion of the film, perhaps reflecting Wang's own understanding of the era.

with a close up of the surface of a river and voiceover by a "wise Paulownia tree" (*zhi yitong*) that offers, "Our story takes place on this river, but the story isn't old, all our memories are still new." The story follows Pan Laowu, Zhao Liang, and Shi Gu, who earn their living guiding log-floats (*fangpai*) downriver, and develops the characters by repeatedly shifting the diegesis between the present and the past, disclosing the still unrequited romances alive in the hearts of Pan and Shi, among other memories and longings. (Zhao is married and has seven daughters.)

Though the episodic film provides several vignettes, an explanation of its final moments are sufficient for this essay. After rescuing a cadre from a labor camp and reuniting Shi Gu with Gaixiu, the four stop in a village to buy supplies and medicine. In the village Pan encounters a woman he once loved, whom he entrusts with ginseng root for the rescued cadre hidden in the countryside. That evening a rapacious official steals the ginseng, and Pan, Shi, Zhao, and Gaixiu run afoul of Red Guards. As they flee down the river Pan vanishes when the raft is torn asunder. The following morning as the three survivors comb the riverbank looking for Pan, a shallow focus close-up looking upriver fills much of the screen with Gaixiu's searching gaze. Shi and Zhao remain out of focus and diminished, but walking with her, following the current toward the camera, along the log-strewn riverbank. After lingering on her face the shot turns 180 degrees to share their perspective looking downriver. The audience now searches the landscape for Pan along with the three survivors. As is the case with *Eleven Flowers* the voiceover returns: "People have self-respect in all kinds of battles. People don't give up easily. Pan Laowu might be up in front. Come let's call him again. Call again, Uncle Pan, Lao Pan." The lens returns to the extreme close-up of the surface of the river that began the film, which, like understandings of the Cultural Revolution and the rustication movement, refuses to stand still and conceals treacherous under-currents.

The river Lēthē from Greek mythology is another treacherous river, because those who drink from it suffer an obliterating amnesia, forgetting everything. Paul Ricoeur writes that the "work" of *anamnēsis,* which he glosses as *recherche* or *rappel* and his

translators render as "search" or "recall," "moves against the river Lēthē."[7] It is in his taxonomy of memories and memory that Ricoeur mentions the Lēthē, a river that resonates with the nameless river in Wu's film and the winding stream that snakes through the ghost marsh. Ricoeur employs Platonic and Aristotelian thinking in order to define both memory-events and their representation. Turning repeatedly to Plato's metaphor of an impression in wax wherein the memory-event is the moment of impression and the impression itself is the memory, Ricoeur glosses *anamnēsis* and *mnēmē*. *Mnēmē* is "simple evocation," "memory as appearing, ultimately passive, to the point of characterizing as an affection—*pathos*—the popping into mind of a memory."[8] He writes explicitly, "By evocation let us understand the unexpected appearance of a memory."[9] He describes *anamnēsis* as an "effort to recall... the memory as an object of a search ordinarily named recall, recollection."[10]

As such it seems reasonable to argue that *mnēmē* and *anamnēsis*, Plato's discovery of deformed wax and readings of the wax impressions (setting aside for now the quality of the wax and reading), comprise affective and pragmatic dimensions of memory.[11] On the one hand it appears that affective memory allows consideration of indexical physical and psychic links between memory and experience, like footprints in sand or images on film stock, between a person and her apprehensions and experiences of the world.[12] The affective dimension of memory suggests that our experiential moments and the memory-images they comprise define our epistemological horizon.

In other words, affective memory (or, perhaps, affect alone) constitutes human perception and provides for self-reflexivity. On the other hand it seems that pragmatic memory allows a person to search the recesses of heart and mind for the name of

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[7] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 25–26.
[8] Ibid., 4, 19.
[9] Ibid., 19.
[10] Ibid., 26.
[11] These are incorrectly reversed in my essay on the appearance of colonial Taiwan in film (Bert Scruggs, "The Postcolonial Appearance of Colonial Taiwan").
[12] Also see André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinema?*, especially volume 1: "Ontologie et langage," and Walter Benjamin's "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." Bill Nichols discusses the theoretical problems obtaining from digital film technology in *Introduction to Documentary*, 56–57. See also Ricoeur's synopsis of Plato's wax metaphor from *Theaetetus* (8–9).

someone, to have her name just beyond reach. For example, no matter how hard he searches Wang Han cannot remember if he had heard the shots fired by an executioner: a failure of pragmatic memory. Affective memory brings forth unbidden moments; a fogbound airport might unexpectedly bring the foggy morning execution to the mind of an adult Wang Han. There are many uses of these two facets of memory, but for now I only want to suggest that moving between these dimensions of memory implies traversing a liminal instability, and therefore any representation of rustication draws attention to both the uses of memory and the manifestations or representations of communal history, and the unstable and ephemeral intersection between affective and pragmatic memories. For readers and audience members alike these dimensions of memory determine the appearance of rustication and the landscape: emergence and aestheticization.

Wu Tianming's film from 1983 is a fresh memory of the Cultural Revolution: "Our story takes place on this river, but the story isn't old, all our memories are still new." The wise Paulownia provides for the audience a disembodied and therefore perhaps superficially apolitical unraveling of the connection between the pragmatic and affective aspects of memory: the reading of a new impression in Plato's wax. The memoires belong to the trees, to nature, but they are *ours*. And returning to the slippage between *mnēmē* and *anamnesis,* Wu's film repeatedly turns to the trope or mode of mnemonic *mise-en-abyme*. In other words, instead of a play within a play, or Wang's still life within a still life, the film turns to memories within memories. In one exemplary sequence memories constitute characters as well.

After moving cadre Xu from a work camp to their raft, Pan, Zhao, and Shi begin the process of nursing him back to health with soup, water, and memories. One by one Pan and Zhao ask Xu if he remembers them; they draw on his pragmatic memory, the ability to search and recall. Xu eventually recalls eating *zongzi* with Pan during the Dragon Boat Festival in 1958, hauling stones with Zhao, as well as Zhao's determination to conceive a son with his wife (in the moment that Xu recalls Zhao only had five daughters). With some cueing Xu eventually recalls Shi as a small boy during the 1956 Mid-Autumn festival. Memories, like soup, restore Xu.

However their memories are also sufficiently generic to allow innumerable

audience members, a preconceived viewing subject, perhaps, to recall their own experiences. In other words, the clichéd memory-events of the characters in *The River without Buoys* such as lunar calendar festivals and public work projects catalyze or evoke the affective memories of some audience members. This possibility of triggering memories, supplanting memories, and perhaps creating transgenerational memories, in turn, implies the possibility of exploring Wu's film, Wang's film, and Liang Xiaosheng's "Land of Wonder and Mystery" vis-à-vis communal memories and calls into question their manipulation by the state. We might theorize a remembering subject, and, in the 2010s, a consuming subject, a memory consumer, but we cannot forget the state's role in the memory market.

It seems possible to read Wu's film as a communal, affective memory that popped into the mind of a generation. In 2002 Dai Sijie's *Balzac et le Petite Tailleuse Chinoise* (*Xiaocaifeng*) similarly popped into the collective mind of rustication returnees, as did Liang Xiaosheng's "Land of Wonder and Mystery" two decades earlier in 1982. More recently still two teleplays by Liang Xiaosheng, *Zhiqing* and *Growth Rings* (*Nianlun*), offered nationally televised memories. These newer memories, however have drawn criticism from scholars like Tao Dongfeng, who has charged Liang Xiaosheng with turning rustication into entertainment (*yulehua*).[13] For generations as different as those who lived through the Great Leap Forward, rustication, the Cultural Revolution, and coming of age in media-saturated-smart-phone era China such memories might belong to a "nonindividualized, communal subject," as theorized by Chris Berry: a viewing subject that is "created by a camera, which is rarely aligned with individual characters." [14]Chris Berry writes:

> separating the viewing subject in this way from any consistent identification with individual characters signifies a privileged position from which the viewing subject can understand events as the enunciating subject, presumably the Party,

[13] Tao Dongfeng, "Liang Xiaosheng zhiqing xiaoshuo de jiazhi wuqu: yi 'Zhiqing,' 'Nianlun' wei li," 69.
[14] Chris Berry, "Neither One thing Nor Another: Toward a Study of the Viewing Subject and Chinese Cinema in the 1980s," 89.

> sees them. Thus, power and knowledge are located not only outside the individual but also outside the ordinary people.[15]

Complicity with the ideology espoused by just such an enunciating subject appears to be Tao's concern with *Zhiqing* and *Growth Rings*.

Wang Xiaoshuai's *Eleven Flowers* is not a fresh memory, it is almost forty years old, and unlike anonymous communal memories belonging to a wise Paulownia, the memories, both affective and pragmatic, belong to Wang Han. However they are memories of an eleven year old filtered through the lens of middle age. Whereas the audience member or viewing subject consuming Wang's text is a voyeur peering into the aestheticized memories of a school boy living in a factory town on the semi-mythical Third Front during the final years of the Cultural Revolution, the viewing subject consuming Wu's text seems required to participate in the memory. Wang Han's voiceover offers, "All these memories are fixed in my mind." The memories are fixed in *his* mind; in other words, they are not *ours*. It seems reasonable to suggest that as she watches *Eleven Flowers* the audience member indulges in non-participatory nostalgia. Conversely it might be suggested that restaurant patrons in a "red restaurant," joining a lively sing-along of patriotic songs from the Cultural Revolution, indulge in participatory nostalgia.[16]

Perhaps the comparison of these two films seems attenuated, because memories from seven years ago and nostalgia for something that happened thirty-seven years ago may defy comparison for some scholars. However, films such as *The River without Buoys* are being re-released on DVD as classic films (*jingdian dianying*). *The River without Buoys* and *Evening Rain (Bashanyeyu*) are widely available in addition to films like *Eleven Flowers* and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. The consumption of such films as well as the fiction written by formerly rusticated youth and even so-called red restaurants seem to imply a nostalgic demand. But does

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[15] Ibid.

[16] For some individuals the question of authenticity looms especially large, as the following introductory sketch of nostalgia suggests. However, my point here is to decide whether or not a reader or viewer participates in the nostalgic yearn or reiteration or simply observes the yearnings and reiterations (compulsive or otherwise) of others.

nostalgia best describe the mnemonic prostheses these "texts" comprise? And, in the case of Liang Xiaosheng's "Land of Wonder and Mystery" of 1982 and Wu's *The River without Buoys* of 1983, are the events too fresh for the pathology of nostalgia?

Nostalgia is often maligned and, because nostalgia seems inauthentic, it has been dismissed by and large from Anglophone literary studies, despite an interest in memory. John Su states that in the few instances where nostalgia is taken up in critical works, "it typically functions as a foil. 'Memory' signifies intimate personal experience, which often counters institutional histories; 'nostalgia' signifies inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests."[17] Aaron Santesso writes, "Nostalgia is commonly nationalized: Americans feel nostalgia for their own Old West rather than for the Western settlement periods of Canada or Brazil, for example."[18] Perhaps this nostalgia drives Wang Han's ruminations on a Third Front childhood.But concern over the inauthenticity of nostalgia as opposed to the putative authenticity of memory calls to mind the affective memory, the indexical memory.

Wang Han's memory is authentic because Wang Han was there. Whether or not he can successfully search for and recall the sounds of an execution, or whether or not he even heard the shots, remains secondary. At the very least his experience serves those who dismiss nostalgia in favor of memory, because the ears that belong to the narrator are those that might have heard shots fired. However, the failure of the pragmatic memory suggests the slippage between nostalgia and affective memory. Is Wang Han remembering the execution? Or is he longing for his childhood? Su attempts to argue that nostalgia can be conceived of as not the mode of the work but as an aesthetic. In other terms we can think of nostalgia as a thesis in addition to or rather than the theme of the text. In short, whereas a text may evoke the nostalgia that so many critics find suspect, it may also at the same time mobilize nostalgia in the service of traumatic memories to argue implicitly for an acknowledgement and forgetting.

Gerald Prince writes that the ideological doctrine as well as the philosophical,

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[17] John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, 2.
[18] Aaron Santesso, *A Careful Longing*, 15.

moral, and political views advanced by a text constitute its thesis.[19] Unlike the thesis, the theme of a text, generally stated, is what the text is "about." Therefore, the theme may raise questions, and the thesis may answer these questions.[20] As such it seems possible to utilize nostalgic theses and themes as a strategy to reconsider the nostalgic or mnemonic consumption of rustication and the Cultural Revolution in print and Internet texts, films, and cultural media as diverse as public monuments and restaurants. Firstly nostalgia can be thought of exclusively as an aesthetic, a theme, a representation of something that never actually happened or existed as portrayed or, to borrow Andre Bazin's ideas on photography, an asymptote of reality. It can also be understood as the cinematic nostalgia described by Frederic Jameson in his comments on George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and the films that followed it.[21]Secondly, in light of Roberta Rubinstein's discussion of "fixing," nostalgia can be reconsidered as a strategy for interrogating not only notions of home, homesickness, and homeland, but also cultural or historical dislocation, aging, and moral responsibility. Rubinstein uses the semantic breadth of the English word, "fix," to suggest that the nostalgic mode fixes something in time, while fixing transgressions of the past. In either case, as John Su argues, nostalgia "encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and [that] the specific objects of nostalgia—lost or imagined homelands—represent efforts to articulate alternatives."[22] In this case it seems that nostalgia serves as an ideological thesis. Incidentally and paradoxically the consumption of the Cultural Revolution and rusticated youth narratives in China today may stem from dissatisfaction with the present system of social relations, a system that is largely driven by capitalist consumption—a market economy. However, in the case of Liang Xiaosheng's early 1980s "A Land of Wonder and Mystery," the reform era—the so-called era of post-socialist consumerism—had only just begun, and the nostalgic cravings of early twenty-first-century China had yet to arrive.

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[19] Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, 97.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 19.
[22] John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, 15.

The Ghosts of Rustication and Landscape

Liang Shaosheng, who later took the penname Liang Xiaosheng, was born on September 22, 1949, in Harbin, Heilongjiang. Liang graduated from high school in 1966 and joined the Heilongjiang Construction Corps in 1968. As a 1966 graduate he is considered a member of the "three old classes" (*laosanjie*) generation of rusticated youth.[23] During his rustication he worked as a farm laborer, primary school teacher, and eventually a reporter, until 1974 when, thanks to a recommendation issued by a lumber mill in Heilongjiang, he was sent to study Chinese literature at Fudan University in Shanghai. Following his graduation in 1977 he worked as an editor in a Beijing film studio and later as a screenwriter in the China Youth Film Studio. Currently he continues to write and is on the Chinese Language and Literature faculty of the Beijing Language and Culture University. In her thumbnail sketch of Liang, Bing Li writes that he is an "innocent idealist" and "chronicler standing up for ordinary people."[24]

Idealism certainly undergirds "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" as it chronicles the tragic demise of three youth in the Great Northern Wilderness (*Beidahuang*), a tragedy that probably resonates with traumatic events encountered by Liang and others of his generation in the northeastern Chinese taiga. Yet Liang's famous short story also introduces an unforgiving environment that makes no distinction among bears, wolves, the native Oroqen, and the young Han Chinese settler colonists. In a putatively anthropocentric narrative, Liang's text creates a truly ecocentric landscape wherein nature consumes the rusticated youth as they strive to reclaim the land for cultivation. The epilogical paragraphs describe a memorial to Li Xiaoyan, Wang Zhigang, and the narrator's younger sister Liang Shanshan on which is carved "those

[23] The Chinese who graduated from middle or high school in 1966, 1967, and 1968 were unable to take high school or college entrance (*gaokao*) examinations, because colleges and universities were closed during those years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In 1977 with the revival of the college entrance examination those who had graduated during 1966, 1967, and 1968 were allowed to sit for the examinations; however, since they were much older than their fellow examinees they came to be known as the *laosanjie* or "three old classes." Examinees who had just finished high school, those in their late teens as opposed to late twenties, were known as the *xinsanji* or *xinsanjie*—"three new classes."

[24] Li Bing, *Dialogue with Twenty Contemporary Chinese Writers*, 115.

who reclaimed the land" (*kenhuangzhe*). Their epithet underscores the domestication of the northeastern wetlands and, like other *zhiqing* narratives, such as Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* (*Langtuteng*) of the mid 2000s, it suggests that human beings can irreversibly change the environment, for better or for worse. However, the environment in Liang Xiaosheng's tale does not accept the plow or tractor as willingly as it does the lives of the young protagonists.

The rusticated youth are consumed by nature: Li Xiaoyan, Wang Zhigang, and Liang Shanshan are trapped by the flooding that arrives with the spring thaw, not unlike the river which prevents Chris McCandless from seeking help in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild.* Penn's film depicts an idealistic well-educated American youth who dies alone in the remote Alaskan frontier, just as Li, Wang, and Liang die in the northeastern Chinese frontier.[25] Li is consumed by illness; wolves kill and eat Wang. Liang is literally swallowed up by the land when she stops foraging for wild vegetables, chases a deer, and becomes trapped, sinking into the ghost marsh. Shanshan's search for sustenance from wild flora also resonates with McCandless who accidentally, but fatally, poisons himself by mistaking wild sweet pea for wild sweet potato. As early as the opening paragraph of "Land of Wonder and Mystery" the narrator tells the reader that the ghost marsh is filled with poisonous grasses.

Reading and writing about the wetlands in the American literary tradition has long been the subject of literary ruminations, as William Howarth demonstrates with examples ranging from Emily Dickinson to Henry David Thorearu.[26] Marshes or wetlands make their appearance in traditional Chinese fiction as well, as the *jianghu* world of outlaws and bandits and the famous Ming novel *Water Margin* (S*huihu zhuan*) suggest. However, despite the title "A Land of Wonder and Mystery," Liang Xiaosheng's nature is wild, dangerous, and for Liang's generation it is a place to be domesticated—consumed as wheat products—and presumably made a part of the political status quo, rather than a place where Oroqen hunters roam without a nation-state. Yet teens, wolves, microbes, and swamps are not the only consumers

[25] It is also worth noting that the young, tragic protagonists in both narratives turn to classical European literature for inspiration.
[26] William Howarth, "Reading the Wetlands," 55–83.

here, in the early twenty-first century formerly rusticated youth are consumed by their own memories, practical or affective.

The audience entertained by the sacrifices of a past generation consumes their memories in televised dramas such as *Zhiqing* and *Growth Rings*. But such a diet seems ideologically unhealthy, because rampant land reclamation has led to natural calamities. And as noted above Tao Dongfeng finds fault in these fictionalizations because they devalue the sacrifices of an entire generation by sanitizing memories of rustication and glossing over ideological violence. In terms of their intellectual value, Tao seems to imply that if Liang's work is not poisonous, it is certainly saccharine in both form and substance. Liang Xiaosheng's role in coming to an understanding of contemporary thinking regarding the rustication project may be under closer scrutiny and remains ambiguous, but his stature as a representative writer of the rusticated youth generation remains unquestionable. Contrary to his more recent work, his earlier texts evoke a sense of heroism and seem to have garnered unqualified praise. Cao Zuoya writes, "Liang tends to find inspiration in the *zhiqing's* heroism, their sprit of self sacrifice and their ability to endure hardship."[27] Tao Dongfeng, despite his denigration of *Growth Rings* and *Zhiqing*, states that Liang's earlier works, especially "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" and "A Blizzard Tonight," are extremely representative of rusticated youth narratives of heroism and tragedy.[28]

That it is possible to discuss the history of Liang's literary works on rustication suggests a need for an extended single-author study, but it also draws attention to the importance of temporal mapping. Because, according to his critics, Liang's stories have evolved from narratives of heroism and tragedy to sanitized entertainment for national television audiences, it seems necessary to sketch or map a plot line for Liang's narrations. In his study of time maps and the social shape of the past, Eviatar Zerubavel writes, "memory is clearly not just a simple mental reproduction of the

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[27] Cao Zuoya, *Out of the Crucible: Literary Works about the Rusticated Youth*, 6.

[28] Tao Dongfeng, "Liang Xiaosheng zhiqing xiaoshuo de jiazhi wuqu: Yi 'zhiqing,' 'nianlun' wei li," 69. In this same essay Tao scrutinizes Liang's more recent works and their television adaptations, "Rusticated Youth" (*Zhiqing*) and "Growth Rings" (*Nianlun*), in order to highlight what he sees as Liang's dilution and manipulation of memories of the era, as well as complicity with official ideological discourse.

past." Nor is it an "altogether random process either. Much of it, in fact, is patterned in a highly structured manner that both shapes and distorts what we actually come to mentally retain from the past."[29] Progress, decline, zigzags, ladders and trees, mountains and valleys, and so forth, according to Zerubavel, can be used to describe the shapes or narrative plots of the past. Liang's texts, as read by Tao seem to follow a declining plot line.

Such a time map is often associated with thematic nostalgia: a desire for the past golden age, especially as culture or society declines. Paradoxically, critiques of *Zhiqing* and *Growth Rings* charge Liang with a declining time map. Those who wish to remember rustication as privation and suffering accuse Liang of portraying moments of rustication as the golden age punctuated with occasional reprehensible characters. In either descending narrative, that is, Liang's representation of the good old days or Liang's betrayal of a generation, the return again and again to the moment of rustication discloses the compulsory reiteration of Posttraumatic Stress. Be it an attempt to forget or to remember, the repetition of the moment suggests the lurking of traumatic experiences.

Beyond the descent narrative marked by a golden age receding into the past, Zerubavel discusses the progress narrative in which an impoverished moment shapes the narration of time. As an example he cites the stories of "hitting rock bottom" which commonly comprise narratives of redemption told by recovering alcoholics and so-called born-again Christians.[30] In other words, there is a significant moment of inflection, which serves as both arrival and departure: one must arrive at rock bottom in order to depart from it. Though it is tied to narratives of decline, progress, and zigzags in rusticated youth stories, a common moment or spatial trope is quite literally the moment of departure.

Many rusticated youth narratives contain an important departure narrative—a moment wherein the city, family, and all that are familiar are exchanged for departure and transit deep into the hinterlands. In Shi Tiesheng's "A Story of Joining the Brigade" (*Chadui de gushi*) transfer after transfer describes the remote nature of his

[29] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, 11.
[30] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, 19.

beloved Qingpingwan: "The place where my troop was sent was separated from Beijing by a road thousands of *li* long. I took a train and then another train, then onto a bus and then onto another bus, and then onto dozens of *li* on a mountain path that a car couldn't travel."[31] Similarly, in her short story "A Beautiful Place," Zhang Manling describes the departure of her train among the noise of gongs and firecrackers, and, upon arrival, a treacherous bus ride that leads to further repeated regroupings and relocations, to smaller and smaller locales, until each educated youth is chosen and taken to the home of a local Dai family.[32] In fact the critical and popular success of Wang Anyi's well known "Destination" (Benci lieche zhongdian), which describes a return to Shanghai from the hinterlands may, in part, stem from her reversal of the trope of departure, and the reverse culture shock that arises when the once familiar becomes exotic, as epitomized by the confusion that riding a city bus causes the narrator. In any case the repetition contained in each of these narrative departures resonates with the repetitive nature of traumatic memories. Not only do memories of rustication surface again and again, the formal structure of reproduction proves repetitive. In other words, both the narration and the narrative disclose compulsory reiteration.

It is unsurprising then that a repetitive departure appears in Liang's "Land of Wonder and Mystery." However the departure reiterated by Liang stands apart from others because, rather than a departure from the city, the narrator and the three characters later memorialized depart from the edges of the Great Northern Wasteland into the wild: the ghost marsh—the wetlands that have defined the edges of China for millennia. Unlike narratives which offer the exchange of a nuclear or extended family for a camp family, Liang's characters push away from a failing camp deeper into the unknown. Emblematic of the spirit of heroism that both Cao and Tao praise in Liang's early works, Li Xiaoyan rallies her comrades. Determined not to be disbanded Li Xiaoyan, Wang Zhigang, Liang Shanshan and her older brother, the narrator, volunteer to depart again from an established camp and go to the ghost marsh.

The ghost marsh, like the opening scene of *The River without Buoys*, makes its

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[31] Shi Tiesheng, *Chadui de gushi*, 3.
[32] Zhang Manling, "You yige meili de difang," 32–33.

appearance in the text before the characters appear but, instead of a Paulownia tree, it is the narrator's memories that introduce it. Although the narrator has survived the ordeal, the story reveals, he writes of learning of the ghost marsh long before arriving. The description of the marsh is a memory within a memory, suggesting an affective evocation of the threatening swamp rather than a mere recollection of sensory images; he is remembering a memory of the marsh. Such an evocation of the ghost marsh does not only resonate with ideas on reiteration and post-traumatic stress, it also suggests the impossibility of a first encounter; in other words, each recollection of the swamp is an evocation of an evocation.

The narrator's first encounter with the ghost marsh is prefigured by what he has heard before his arrival. There, but never there as a first arrival, the swamp or marsh or tiaga is truly a ghost. There is no benevolence in the ghost marsh. It is

> A swamp of deathly loneliness filled with years and months of layers of dead branches, leaves, and poisonous weeds. The dark brown sluggish brown surface of the water pretends a false calm. Sunken deep are the rotting bones of bears, hunters' guns, and the tractors of those reclaiming the land… its stench of death detectable at a hundred *li*.[33]

The narrator sets the stage for the story as did the wise old Paulownia tree and, like Wang Han, he offers a "voiceover" epilogue. After describing the memorial to Li, Wang, and his younger sister, he sighs, "Great Northern Wilderness." Though the land has been cleared and crops now flourish where the ghost marsh once was, he does not murmur of the fields or even the "mother land" (*zuguo*), instead it is the now absent wilderness. The traumatic moments, like the untamed land, have vanished.

But the narrator is not alone at the memorial stone; a young man, who he presumes to be his younger sister's lover, lays flowers at the memorial and departs. Yet the narrator does not stop him to ask his name, instead he simply comments, "He is one of our generation, that is enough." That he is simply "one of our generation" brings back

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[33] Liang Xiaosheng, "Zhe shi yipian shenqi de tudi," 160.

the distinction between communal memories and individual memories, as touched upon briefly in the discussion of Wu's and Wang's films: *our* memories in *The River without Buoys* and *my* memories in *Eleven Flowers.* Though Liang's memories are of his lost love, Li Xiaoyan, his sister, Shanshan, and his comrade, Wang Zhigang, they also belong to *our* generation.

Perhaps here also Roberta Rubinstein's thoughts on fixing the past may prove helpful.[34] Liang's recognition of his dead sister's boyfriend and not stopping the young man to ask his name are indicative of a moment of forgiveness. Earlier in the story the narrator learns that his sister has had an abortion and, in a particularly violent passage, Li Xiaoyan comes to Shanshan's aid when the narrator strikes and yells at her for ruining his reputation. As even a cursory review of memoirs written by individuals who spent years in the countryside reveal, romantic physical relationships among the urban youth or between themselves and the local people, as well as the result of unwanted pregnancies and the elective and forced abortions, were not uncommon.

As Joan Chen's *Xiuxiu the Sent Down Girl* (*Tianyu*) and Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, among others, reveal, fictional romances, as well as rapes, and their resultant abortions, are unsurprisingly common. However, regardless of the frequency of these romantic, violent, and medical moments, Internet bulletin boards reveal that memories of such moments revisit men and, especially, women of that generation, as regularly as Yihong Pan dreams of her rustication. Reflecting on this moment, as he does with "A Land of Wonder and Mystery," Liang's text fixes the past. The conception and abortion are fixed in the past and, by forgiving his sister's lover and leaving him as simply an anonymous member of "our generation," Liang Xiaosheng's "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" may also fix the moment of loss for countless individuals. In a nutshell, Liang Xiaosheng's "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" may hinge on the ghost marsh haunting the northeastern Chinese tiaga, but the memories evoked and fixed in his text are as anthropocentric and gynocentric as they are ecocentric and traumatic.

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[34] Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters*, 6.

Conclusion: Epitaphs, Families, Repetitive Remembrances, and Vanishing Landscapes

Can the graves of "the cultivators" be compared to the text or story itself? Is "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" an epitaph? To which discourse, popular or otherwise, does it belong? Liang's story is not a lengthy inscription on a stone somewhere in the Great Northern Wasteland; instead it circulates as a printed text and is to be found on the Internet. It is a floating signifier that moves from reader to reader, rather than a text to which readers make visits. Regardless of the publication of the narration or the inscription of the epitaph, the ghost marsh vanishes into the wheat fields and graves of Li, Wang, and Liang. The graves become a memorial to the victorious cultivators over the once menacing ghost marsh, now that the Great Northern Wasteland has become the Great Northern Granary (*beidacang*). However, these three young protagonists are individuals; each dies a separate death, suggesting it is more difficult to collectivize persons than to cultivate land. But reading them symbolically leads to the possibility that the epitaph, the text that describes what is no longer present, memorializes the three individuals, "rusticated, educated youth" (*zhiqing*), or the idealism that they embody.

Familial memories, or memories of family, especially those of a young person going to rural and primitive areas, like the notion of an epitaph noted above, and repetition, as discussed below, deepens further an understanding of the memories of rustication and trauma. Among common leitmotifs in rusticated youth narratives, in addition to the extended moment of departure and ill befallen love in the countryside, there is also the family left in the city.

In many cases the family left behind by the rusticated youth is troubling in and of itself. A few examples include the son of an elite family who barters a friend's way into a chess tournament with a family heirloom in A Cheng's "Chess King," the vaguely problematic family left behind by the narrator in Zhang's "A Beautiful Place," and the young woman who freezes to death while finally being allowed to stand guard in Liang's Xiaosheng's "Blizzard Tonight." In "A Land of Wonder and Mystery," Li Xiaoyan comes from an elite background; the reader and other troop

members believe she had trained as a ballerina in Shanghai before setting out for the Great Northern Wasteland. It is for this reason that she goes out of her way to dress plainly and vows not to return to visit her family for three years. For characters like Li, remembering their family and memories of their pre-rustication past can be a point of stress and may be a political liability. Unfolding such familial disavowal or forgetting may offer still more layers of trauma comprising rusticated youth narratives and their continuing critics.

The narrator's mother is stricken with illness in "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" so, despite being denied permission by the troop to go to her side, he returns home and stays a few days following her death to attend to the details. Li Xiaoyan vows not to visit her parents for three years. She makes this vow not out of spite, as do some characters in examples of Scar Literature, but, instead, to prove her patriotism to herself. Moreover, her national loyalty is not contrasted with her familial loyalty. Here again an uneasy, but productive, comparison can be made with *Into the Wild*. Both Li Xiaoyan and Chris McCandless are from elite backgrounds and both desert their families for the object of an ideology. McCandless shuts off his family in order to escape what he sees as decadent middle-class hedonism. He strikes out off into the wilderness in search of a communion with nature that he has only encountered in literature. Li Xiaoyan vows to not see her parents for three years in order to build a better society and culture; she does not reject the present, but finds it deficient and filled with opportunity. His is a flight of pessimism, and hers one of optimism, but both find hope and freedom in nature. Nature and nation coincide in these characters as ideological objects. The ideology that they fervently apply to themselves, leads to divergent estrangement from parents, for one it is to escape their world and many of the discourses that comprise it, and for the other it is to activate unrealized discourses of power for utopian purposes. Why, then, do such extreme ideological regimes both resolve with death in the wilderness? Perhaps this is where we find the intersection of nature and culture.

Memories are often referenced by place; in other words, be it the affective or pragmatic memory, we often recall or suddenly remember where something happened. Memories are locations and, in the case of Liang Xiaosheng's narrator, the locations,

the Great Norhtern Wasteland and ghost marsh, are memories. Perhaps as suggested above with the character Wang Han in Wang Xiaoshuai's *Eleven Flowers* a fogbound morning in an airport stirs the memory of the morning of the execution, and so it would not be surprising if he incorporated the fog imposed flight delay into a story to tell his friend as they wait for luggage or a taxi at his final destination. The location of the narration adds a layer of meaning that accrues with each iteration of the narrative. Similarly, reading Liang Xiaosheng's "A Land of Wonder and Mystery" in what was once the Great Northern Wasteland differs from reading it in Beijing, or Irvine, California.

Formal repetition, or repetitive content, as Edward Gunn has written, suggests a parallel between literature and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.[35] More interesting still, and perhaps applicable to readings of narrations of rustication, is the idea he puts forth that the repetition is most troubling inasmuch as the outcome of each repetition is a foregone conclusion.Each time the narrator revisits the Great Northern Wasteland, he revisits the graves of Li Xiaoyan, Wang Zhigang, and Liang Shanshan, and the memory he encounters of their death and the success of the reclamation troop, he knows what he will find before he arrives: the presence of an absence. The ghost marsh and the Great Northern Wasteland, the location of his memory, and perhaps the memory-as-landscape, vanishes. Indeed, perhaps this is the reason that Wu Tianming inscribed his cinematic memory on an unnamed river without buoys; the anonymous river disappears only to reappear as the space between mind and place, as does the ghost marsh. "This emphasis on context argues for finding a middle synthesis of experience and imagination, a region lying amid apparent counterparts."[36]

This essay has attempted to suggest that the recurrence of memories of physical and psychic suffering has yet to be sanitized in "A Land of Wonder and Mystery," and perhaps narrations of such trauma in conjunction with the consuming ecology of the ever hauntingly absent ghost marsh truly obtain a sublime landscape in all the breathtaking horror and pleasure that such landscapes promise. However, this essay also suggests that, by more carefully considering the interplay between memory and

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[35] Edward Gunn, "Duanlie de qiangpo: lun chuangshang de biaoshu celie."
[36] William Howarth, "Reading the Wetlands," 62.

place, more nuanced, and perhaps more ecologically and critically engaged, assessments of rusticated youth fiction and thinking on the relationship between nature and literature in contemporary China will also be forthcoming.

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